

# The Army and Public Affairs: Enduring Principles

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Revolutionary War soldier and patriot Joel Barlow wrote shortly after the War for Independence that what separated free men from the oppressed was “a habit of thinking.” Men submitted to a king, he said, not because that ruler was stronger or wiser than they but because of a belief that he was born to govern. In the same way, they became free when the conviction grew in them that they were in themselves equal to one another. The idea alone was what counted: “Let the people have time to become thoroughly and soberly grounded in the doctrine of equality, and there is no danger of oppression either from government or from anarchy.” It was the American people’s habit of thinking “that all men are equal in their rights,” Barlow avowed, that had compelled them to revolt from Great Britain and that sustained their independence.<sup>1</sup>

Historians might quibble with Barlow’s further conclusion that men will always act in their own best interests if only shown where those interests lie, but his insight into the American character and the nature of the American political experiment was important. For the founders of the United States had indeed constructed not just a new form of government but a new conception of politics: one rooted in the habit of equality and expressed by the principle that, as Charles Pinckney of South Carolina put it, “all authority flows from and returns at stated periods to, the people.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, if that concept has been “the pivot,” as James Madison observed, upon which the entire American system has revolved,<sup>3</sup> it has also been a source of complication for the United States Army. For although the American soldier has taken pride in his role as guardian of the republic, he has also had to contend in time of war with the inefficiencies imposed by his nation’s unique egalitarian and democratic psychology. Individual commanders have responded to that challenge differently, some more adequately than others. To all of them, however, good public relations—toward the people, who supply the troops; the Congress,

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which provides the money; the troops, who do the fighting; and the news media, which *The Federalist Papers* regarded as the “expeditious messenger” that would help concerned citizens “sound the alarm” should government become involved in “any pernicious project”<sup>4</sup>—have been of vital importance.

George Washington understood the nature of the American point of view. A member of the militia rather than a professional soldier, he understood that the men who followed him were themselves civilian in attitude and that European methods of command would never work in the American environment. As the great organizer of the Continental Army, Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, put it in a letter to Benjamin Franklin, the American soldier was different from his European counterpart. Both were good fighters, but the European would obey an order without question while the American demanded an explanation. Washington thus put aside the threats of flogging and execution that constituted a large part of the British army’s system of discipline and appealed instead to his soldiers’ intelligence and their sense of loyalty to their communities. The attitude that permeated his command was summarized in the *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* (better known as “The Blue Book”) published in 1779: A captain’s “first object should be to gain the love of his men, by treating them with every possible kindness and humanity, enquiring into their complaints and when well founded, seeing them redressed. He should know every man of his company by name and character.”<sup>5</sup>

Washington recognized that his army of civilians needed the support of the civilian community if it was to succeed. He thus kept up a running dialogue with Congress, appealing for assistance and supplies, but also did what he could to maintain the morale of the legislators’ constituents at home. The approach that emerged was simple. Washington and his commanders made patriotic speeches where they could but relied mainly upon the organs of the civilian community—the churches, the press, the pronouncements of the various county and state governments—to carry their message. After a defeat, Washington invariably accepted and spread exaggerated reports of enemy casualties to keep the people from becoming discouraged, but he was also keenly aware that facts spoke louder than propaganda.<sup>6</sup> When Congress recommended that he commandeer supplies at bayonet point for his starving

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troops at Valley Forge, he refused the suggestion. He understood that American soldiers would earn the gratitude of the people by suffering hardship, even as the British earned their hatred by plundering the countryside.<sup>7</sup>

Since the newspapers of America were heavily favorable to the revolution and enjoyed wide circulation (in 1778 the *Connecticut Courant* claimed an amazing 8000 readers), Washington made it a point to support them. He afforded patriot editors fleeing from the British the protection of his Army and on one occasion even supplied a publisher with valuable tenting cloth for the manufacture of paper so that the troops would have an opportunity to read a newspaper. The press responded by fanning the flames of revolution. Printers published eyewitness accounts of battles and official communiqués from Washington and other generals. They made the depravity of the British a prominent theme and called again and again for public support for the Army. The effect on the public is difficult to gauge from two hundred years' distance, but some of it can be seen in the letters to the editor that appeared in the newspapers of the day. Writers lavished attention on the Army, referring to its men as "the boys from home" and warning solicitously that parents would hold military leaders strictly accountable for the "moral conduct" of their sons, who should be protected from "gaming, profaneness, and debauchery."<sup>8</sup>

George Washington understood that the war he fought was in part a public opinion war. He wanted victories on the battlefield but refused to achieve them at the expense of the people he hoped to influence. History ruled in his favor. The surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown would have been only a momentary lapse for the British, but for the conviction of Britain's rulers that the people of America were united against them and that further struggle would be futile.

In the years that followed the American Revolution, the habit of mind of the American people remained much as it had been in Barlow's day, but the military tended to forget the lesson taught of Washington's example. Concentrating on the truth that in battle men must obey to survive and shunned by a civilian community that held standing armies in suspicion as a threat to civil liberties, the professional soldiers of the Army withdrew into their own community. Andrew Jackson exemplified the attitude of many soldiers during the War of 1812. Preparing the defenses of New Orleans, he put an end to rumors that local leaders were contemplating some sort of capitulation to the British by threatening to blow up their meeting place, the city hall. The people reciprocated. Feelings against Jackson ran so high in the city after the return of peace that the courts forced him to pay a \$1000 fine for failing to obey a writ of habeas corpus.<sup>9</sup>

The Army suffered no broadly adverse public consequences from the general's actions at New Orleans because the city in 1814 was relatively

isolated from the rest of the United States and Jackson was one of the few legitimate heroes the war had produced. Circumstances changed in the years that followed. The growth of literacy, the invention of the telegraph, and continuing developments in the technology of news-gathering drew the territories of the United States more and more closely together. By 1860, more than 50,000 miles of telegraph wire spanned the country, and newspapers were in daily, sometimes bitter competition for the latest word on anything of importance that happened anywhere. The public, for its part, fell in with the development and accepted it as a matter of course.

The change had profound implications for the Army when the Civil War began, because commanders had to harmonize their concern for military security with a news-reporting situation that required the utmost discretion. The newspapers, on the one hand, were of little mind to observe official restrictions and were clearly capable of informing the enemy of Union dispositions and developments in time to have an effect on the outcome of a battle. The war, on the other hand, was once again a conflict for public opinion in which the morale of the Congress, the American people, and the soldier were of vital importance. The public itself was dangerously divided on whether to continue the fight and hungry for news of what was happening in the field. In New York City alone the circulation of the newspapers could increase by five times when word of a major battle arrived.<sup>10</sup> The troops were just as news-hungry. When the war entered Pennsylvania, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* often sold up to 25,000 copies of a single issue to the men in the field.<sup>11</sup> During a lull in the Battle of Cedar Creek in October 1864, observers later remarked that the first thing the men did all along the line was to sit down, boil coffee, and pull out their newspapers.<sup>12</sup>

Neither the military nor the government of President Abraham Lincoln came to terms with the problem. The War Department imposed censorship immediately after the Battle of Bull Run, but the enterprise limped throughout the war, hampered by confusion over whether the State Department, the Treasury, or the War Department had jurisdiction. In a vain attempt to counteract the rumors and misinformation appearing in the press, the Secretary of the War early in 1864 began to issue his own dispatches through the Associated Press. Yet if his effort had any effect it was small. Official communiqués lacked the color that creative newsmen working from the barest minimum of information could provide. President Lincoln suppressed a number of small and large newspapers across the country for security violations. Yet even that made little difference. The public demanded news and the press intended to supply it, whether it existed or not.<sup>13</sup>

The public affairs function in the field was likewise mainly a matter of improvisation. Each commander had his own policy for handling the press. Politically oriented generals cultivated reporters and even wrote articles for publication in the newspapers. The professionals, meanwhile, hated newsmen



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**Headquarters of the *New York Herald* in the field, August 1863.**

for the misinformation they spread and the damage they could do both to security and to the careers of commanders. General Sherman, in particular, questioned the government's practice of allowing newsmen to accompany the armies. The accounts of battle appearing in the press were to him "false, false as hell," and the readers of such drivel little more than an unthinking herd. "Vox populi?" he questioned; "Vox humbug!" As a result, one *New York Tribune* correspondent complained, "A cat in hell without claws is nothing [compared] to a reporter in General Sherman's army."<sup>14</sup>

Grant was bitter as well, but in better touch with the realities facing the government. He recognized that a significant number of Americans disagreed with the war and that President Lincoln was experiencing grave political problems because of the war's lack of progress. Prior to the great victories of 1864 at Atlanta and in the Shenandoah Valley, he said, war weariness became so pronounced that "anything that could have prolonged the war a year beyond the time when it did finally close would probably have exhausted the North to such an extent that they might have abandoned the contest and agreed to a separation." Grant believed that the Northern press was worth more than 100,000 fighting men to Lee and envied the supposed ability of the Confederate government to control its news media. Yet he recognized that good public affairs dictated a more lenient policy, if only to maintain the government's communications with the American people. "In the North," he observed, echoing Pinckney and Madison, "the people governed and could stop hostilities whenever they chose to stop supplies."<sup>15</sup>

For his own part, while criticized brutally at times by the press, Grant had the good sense to cultivate relations with at least one prominent reporter, Sylvanus Cadwalder of the *New York Tribune*. The newsman accompanied Grant on most of the general's campaigns and was even present at Appomattox Court House on the day Lee surrendered. So trusted was he that on one occasion he made a dangerous ride through enemy lines with a private message from Grant to Lincoln informing the President that the general intended to prevail in the Wilderness even if the effort took all summer. The reports that originated from Grant's relationship with Cadwalder, as a result, were relatively straightforward. In contrast to the word that came from Sherman's army, they certainly helped to quiet public concern that the war would go on without end.<sup>16</sup>

In the years following the Civil War, American suspicion of the military continued. Congress, as in the past, kept the Army carefully subordinate to civilian authority and spent little more than necessary to subdue the Indians and secure the continent. In 1877 it even failed to pass the military appropriation bill, forcing officers to go into debt to continue in the service. Although there was obviously a compelling need for the sort of public and congressional understanding that would pave the way for a substantial standing force, none materialized. Safe behind their ocean moats, Americans continued to put their greatest reliance on the militia in case of emergency and to arm in haste, only when war seemed imminent.

The military, for its part, nursed wounds left over from the Civil War. Although a newsman died with General Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, reporters accompanying military expeditions continued to be at best a nuisance as far as most officers were concerned. The commander of the American expeditionary force to Cuba during the Spanish American War, General William R. Shafter, summarized the military's attitude. Unprepared for a request from the famous war correspondent Richard Harding Davis to go ashore with the first wave of troops at Daiquiri and intent upon the business at hand, he swore angrily at the reporter: "I don't give a damn who you are. I'll treat you all alike!" Davis and other reporters reciprocated by vilifying Shafter.<sup>17</sup>

But the Spanish American War would have been a public relations disaster for the Army even if Shafter had exercised the utmost tact. The United States went into it unprepared and won, as Davis observed, because it had "euchred God's almighty storm and bluffed the eternal sea."<sup>18</sup> The press, in the event, was bound to see what was wrong and to report it.

In the years that followed, as the country once again subsided into peacetime complacency, the Army began at last to grapple seriously with the public relations prerequisites for achieving a higher level of defense preparedness. The potentially hostile navies of Britain and Germany roamed the seas to the east; Mexico, to the south, seemed continually absorbed by revolutions

that threatened to boil over into American territory; and Japan to the west gave every appearance of becoming both commercial rival and military adversary.

The possibility of a conflict with Japan in 1907 served as the immediate catalyst for change. Nothing came of the threat, but the Chief of Staff of the Army, Major General James Franklin Bell, recognized that if a war had occurred the United States would again have been unprepared. He drafted a long-range plan of expansion and improvement to remedy the situation but perceived immediately that Congress would never go along without considerable persuasion. To that end, he established a board of distinguished citizens to conduct an investigation and recommend appropriate changes. On the side, he hired a retired Army officer, Major John A. Dapray, to handle public relations on the issue and appointed Captain (later Major General) Johnson Hagood to serve as a full-time liaison with Congress.<sup>19</sup>

Bell was forced to step aside when his vehicle struck a Washington trolley in one of the nation's first automobile accidents, but his successors took up the program and continued to press for military reforms. They achieved some successes but never completely overcame the reluctance of either Congress or the president to fund a larger Army. Only in December 1915, with World War I raging in Europe, did President Woodrow Wilson finally send a bill on national defense to Congress.

In the spring of 1916, with 5000 American troops operating in Mexico in search of Pancho Villa and preparations for possible involvement in Europe at last beginning, the Secretary of the Army, Newton Baker, appointed a personable young officer, Major Douglas MacArthur, to deal with the newspapermen who had begun to cover the activities at the War Department. Issuing news releases and granting interviews, MacArthur became the Army's first true public affairs officer.<sup>20</sup> Historian R. Ernest Dupuy maintains that it was largely through MacArthur's strenuous efforts that the military services overcame the American public's reluctance to accept the Selective Service Act of 1917.<sup>21</sup>

As part of the general effort to improve the Army's readiness, proposals had surfaced in military journals as early as 1907 seeking legislation to regulate the press in time of war.<sup>22</sup> In 1913, a one-time Spanish American War correspondent who admitted contritely to having committed dangerous security indiscretions himself, J. C. O'Laughlin, lectured at both the Army and Navy War Colleges on the advisability of some form of regulation. Two years later the Army War College itself published a book on relations between the Army and the press in wartime that proposed a system of control.<sup>23</sup>

Whatever the influence of those preparations, when the United States entered World War I, war reporting fell in with the patterns of propaganda already prevalent in Europe. President Woodrow Wilson reasoned, as had European leaders, that the outcome of the war depended powerfully on the people's will to sacrifice and persist. Over one million men had been casualties



in the Battle of the Somme alone. On that account, Wilson established a Committee on Public Information under journalist George Creel to do everything it could to strengthen national determination. Evolving into a mammoth propaganda organization, the Creel Committee, as it was called, came to maintain offices in every neutral and Allied country. It issued a daily newspaper, operated a press service that fed information to the news media, produced films and foreign language publications, and enlisted a corps of 75,000 patriotic speakers reaching into every part of the nation. Its organs stressed the supposed barbarity of the German armies and the justice of the Allied cause. Wilson himself contributed forcefully to the effort by appealing in his speeches to American idealism. The war thus became in the eyes of many Americans an effort to end all wars and a crusade to make the world safe for democracy.<sup>24</sup>

The US Army in France made fewer mistakes than it had during the Civil War and in Cuba but failed to rise above the Wilson Administration's tendency to propagandize and its own continuing suspicion of the press. Recognizing at last that the American soldier yearned for news of what was going on, for example, it provided him with his own newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, authored by service personnel at military expense. The publication contributed greatly to Army morale, but its content nevertheless merged with the distorted themes appearing in the United States. In the same way, the Army's policies for handling war correspondents were cautious in the extreme. American newsmen who wished to report the war had to be accredited by a lengthy process that included a personal appearance before the Secretary of War, an oath to write the truth, and submission of a \$10,000 bond to insure their proper conduct in the field. In France, they submitted their writing to military censors who operated under the intelligence directorate (G-2), the arm of the Army most certain to protect even the least significant military secrets.

Military men also tended to remain aloof from the press. The Commander of American forces, General John J. Pershing, for one, rarely gave interviews. When Westbrook Pegler of the United Press attempted to speak with the general, for example, he was ordered abruptly to "get the hell out of my office!" Even so, responding to the American public's continuing demand for as much news as possible from the front, the Army allowed American reporters considerable freedom to accompany the troops in the field. A number thus took up station with the units of their choice and returned to headquarters only long enough to have their reports censored and dispatched.

As for the censorship itself, the record is mixed. The allies prided themselves on their democratic principles and publicized the fact that the news their publics received was more plentiful and freer of restraints than that of the enemy. As a result, although the press remained unsatisfied, American censors allowed at least the general facts of the war and even some unpalatable news to pass. The stream of propaganda and official information flowing from

the Creel Committee and military agencies nevertheless so eclipsed what the civilian press produced that it was bound to color and distort the public's understanding of the war.<sup>25</sup>

Reporters had little choice but to cooperate while the fighting continued. They contented themselves with writing the sort of morale-building human interest stories that their readers relished and the censors loved. Afterwards, they denounced the public affairs efforts of the US government so roundly and in such sweeping terms that the word *propaganda* acquired a whole new series of unsavory connotations.<sup>26</sup> The chief American censor for the US Army in Europe, newsman Frederick Palmer, expressed the feelings of most responsible critics. Referring years afterward to the "double life" he had led during the war, he stated his belief that he had served as "a public liar to keep up the spirit of the armies and peoples of our side."<sup>27</sup> Other commentators were equally emphatic. If censorship had been necessary to defeat the Germans, they said, the military had exercised it stupidly and with unreasonable severity. The overenthusiastic idealism of civilian officials had meanwhile tricked both the press and the common man into believing the "foolish dream" that an Allied victory would usher in a new era of peace for mankind.<sup>28</sup>

Whatever the validity of those claims, the military during World War I had clearly allowed Sherman's type of mentality to overwhelm that of Washington and Grant. Inexperienced in the art of public affairs, the Army in the field had failed to harmonize its unquestioned need for security with the American public's equally legitimate requirement for honest information about the war. Military managers such as Pershing were quick to brush the press aside, and their censors were overly concerned with protecting every aspect of the developing American involvement, to the detriment of public understanding. In the event, the war ended quickly enough to preclude the sort of devastating backlash that Grant had foreseen during the Civil War,<sup>29</sup> but the consequences were still severe. By feeding the instinct of the American public and Congress to withdraw once more behind the oceans and to cut military expenditures, the public affairs effort actually handicapped the military's ability during the 1930s adequately to prepare for the coming of World War II.

The military nevertheless learned from the experience. Following the war, the Army's press relations section became the central coordinator of all activities that informed the public about the Army's functions, objectives, and problems. By 1930, each technical and administrative branch of the Army and most major posts had public affairs officers in residence. They prepared speeches for general officers, maintained liaison with the press, and insured that contacts with civilian organizations remained positive and helpful to the Army's goals. While those efforts were developing, the Army also attempted to inspire its personnel to improve relations with the general public. For example, as Chief of Staff, General Pershing strove to overcome his officers' continuing distaste for civilians by ordering his men to mingle with the people

living in areas near military bases. The effort was only marginally successful. Pershing's directive was ahead of its time. Few officers complied.<sup>30</sup>

More productive was an attempt by the Public Affairs Branch during the 1930s to divorce itself from G-2. Reasoning that the intelligence directorate's exaggerated concern for secrecy hampered legitimate efforts to keep the public and Congress informed, information officers continually pressed for affiliation with an agency that represented a more flexible point of view. G-2 held on tenaciously but finally agreed on the eve of World War II to transfer the Public Affairs Branch to the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army. As part of the arrangement, the agency maintained one observer in the public affairs section to assert security requirements but yielded final say on all disputed matters to higher authority.<sup>31</sup>

The coming of World War II served as a test of the military's increased sophistication with public affairs. Working from a recognition that neither the soldier nor the public would function well unless they had a keen appreciation of the importance of the war and of what was happening, the armed services attempted to keep both groups informed without releasing information of value to the enemy. The Army's Information and Education Division established radio stations to provide news and entertainment to the troops. *Stars and Stripes* reappeared. A magazine named *Yank* followed. A host of psychological and sociological studies undertook to learn how the soldier thought, what his fears were, and what would motivate him. They produced a fund of facts that aided leaders in determining how to deal with the troops' fear of German weapons, their attitudes toward being wounded, and how they felt about everything from food to pay.<sup>32</sup>

The ability of each nation involved to broadcast news electronically had a profound effect on the handling of the press during the war. Since it was clear that bad news would become public anyway, the United States and its allies attempted to keep both the troops and the public informed of at least general trends. Some correspondents complained that censorship was too stringent and that the Navy was particularly reluctant to release word of American losses—Admiral Ernest J. King, the Navy's chief, avowed that he would have preferred to release only one statement about the war, the one announcing victory—but the Army, for its part, succeeded in opening enough information to keep the press reasonably satisfied.

Conflicts between the security-conscious military and such civilian information agencies as the Office of War Information, which argued for the release of "everything known to the enemy or that would not give him aid," were nevertheless unavoidable.<sup>33</sup> As Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson complained, the problem of reconciling the two points of view was sometimes almost insurmountable. "I am," said Stimson, "in the position of the innocent bystander in the case of an attempt by a procession of the Ancient and

Honorable Order of Hibernians and a procession of Orangemen to pass each other on the same street."<sup>34</sup> The military prevailed in disputes of that sort, and the results failed to justify the fears of many libertarians that greater official reticence would give "aid and comfort to men responsible for our military or civil failures." Although some commanders were hardly above overplaying their victories, battles during World War II were rarely misrepresented, and atrocity stories, fictional heroics, and outrageously inflated victories appeared less often than in World War I.

This was due at least in part to the personalities and beliefs of the Army's commanders, especially the Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, and the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Marshall considered the individuality of the American soldier a priceless asset. He insisted on discipline and respect for leadership but demanded, as had Washington and Von Steuben, that commanders treat the soldier as a thinking human being. Marshall's attitude was clear in the instructions he gave for running *Stars and Stripes*. Although the newspaper's war stories were censored, there was to be no official control over anything else that appeared. The general understood that the policy would provoke some commanders, but he insisted that repression of any sort would destroy the paper's image "as the voice of the enlisted man."<sup>36</sup> "A soldier's newspaper, in these grave times, is more than a morale venture," he added. "It is a symbol of the things we are fighting to preserve and spread in this threatened world. It represents the free thought and free expression of a free people."<sup>37</sup>

If Marshall knew instinctively how to deal with the soldier, he had to learn how to deal with the press. At first he kept newsmen at a distance and delegated to his subordinates the task of explaining the Army's policies. Later, as he gained confidence, he held on-the-record briefings for important correspondents. By the time of the Normandy invasion, he was meeting with the press openly to appeal for understanding of the Army's problems and to argue in favor of commanders such as General George S. Patton, who were sometimes the subject of controversy.<sup>38</sup>

Through it all, he pressed his commanders to cultivate the press and he kept up a stream of suggestions to Army public affairs officers on ways to present the Army's story more effectively. Dictatorships had the advantage in marshalling men and materiel to battle, he told his associates, but well-informed democracies were stronger. Dictatorships fell to pieces completely when weakened leadership could no longer enforce conformity. But democracies, by virtue of the free participation by the people, were more resilient, tending to solidify in the face of adversity.<sup>39</sup>

Eisenhower shared Marshall's beliefs about the necessity for keeping the public informed. Convinced that democracies were incapable of waging war without widespread popular support, he asserted that Americans, in particular, "either will not or cannot fight at maximum efficiency unless they

understand the why and wherefore of their orders.”<sup>40</sup> Considering good relations with the press essential to the process of forging support at home and unity among America’s allies in Europe, he made public affairs a command priority. Where General MacArthur in the Pacific kept reporters almost completely at bay, Eisenhower flattered newsmen by turning them into “quasi-members” of his staff. To build the reporters’ trust, he also instructed his censors never to cut “personal criticism of me or of my actions” from press dispatches.<sup>41</sup> Reporters, as a result, developed great confidence in him. Although they occasionally criticized his decisions, they stood with him when it mattered. When he requested, for example, that they suppress for the sake of morale the story that General Patton had slapped an infirm soldier during the Sicilian campaign, they banned the news so completely that word of the incident took three months to reach newspapers in the United States.<sup>42</sup>

Relations with the press during World War II were so well maintained that few criticisms emerged when the conflict ended. True, writer Fletcher Pratt avowed that official censors had created a legend “that the war was won without a single mistake, by a command consisting exclusively of geniuses.”<sup>43</sup> Novelist John Steinbeck alleged that the press cooperated so completely with the censors that it isolated the American public from the reality of the war.<sup>44</sup> And journalist Phillip Knightley suggested years later that the American public received little more news of the war than the people of Japan: what the government wanted known and nothing else.<sup>45</sup> The consensus of most commentators, however, has been that, under the circumstances and except in a few instances, World War II was accurately and honestly reported by both the government and the news media.<sup>46</sup>

The same could hardly be said for the wars that followed in Korea and Vietnam. At the start of the war in Korea, American commanders apparently expected the same sort of cooperation from the press that they had received during World War II. Lacking facilities to censor news dispatches, they imposed a system of voluntary guidelines for reporters to follow. The approach seemed successful at first. The United Nations Commander in Korea, General of the Armies MacArthur, cabled the Department of the Army in September 1950 that he was reasonably satisfied. Free of censorship, he said, the press had afforded the American public almost complete coverage of the war, “without, as far as I know, a single security breach of a nature to provide effective assistance to the enemy.”<sup>47</sup>

MacArthur changed his mind with the setbacks that accompanied Communist China’s entry into the war. Hampered by fierce competition among reporters and by a failure clearly to specify what news was of value to the enemy, his system broke down. With breaches of security by the press almost a daily occurrence, he had little choice but to invoke censorship. The result was hardly satisfactory. Although the new rules succeeded in reducing

the number of security violations, they failed to stop them completely. Those few reporters who were willing to flaunt their independence could still report freely when they traveled to Japan and the United States. As a result, on 18 June 1951, *Newsweek* published a map detailing the order of battle for the entire US 8th Army.<sup>48</sup>

Military information officers, for their part, provoked the press on a number of occasions by extending censorship into areas of legitimate discussion and by withholding information on matters that had little to do with military security. When inmates rioted at a United Nations prisoner of war facility in April 1952, for example, the information officers withheld all word of the event lest it become an issue in Armistice negotiations. They also delayed before releasing information on the seizure of the American commander of the Kojo-do POW camp by enemy inmates during May 1952. In both cases, word surfaced in the form of newspaper exposés that did more damage to the Army than to the negotiations.<sup>49</sup>

Although the Army's experience with public affairs during the Korean War was laden with problems,<sup>50</sup> the American news media appear for the most part to have supported the war. The same was true for the war in Vietnam, at least until the Tet Offensive of 1968. Prominent newspapers such as the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* and *The New York Times* consistently questioned US policy in Southeast Asia, but most of the broadcast and print media supported President Lyndon Johnson's desire to keep communism from spreading in South Vietnam. If they disagreed at all it was with the tactics the United States chose to employ. Both they and their reporters in the field tended to believe that Americans should take charge of the war and carry it to a quick, clean conclusion.<sup>51</sup>

The public affairs policy adopted by the US command in South Vietnam was built in part upon that fact. General William C. Westmoreland, in consultation with agencies in Washington, opted for a policy of voluntary guidelines for the press over censorship because he trusted the good will of the American correspondents reporting the war. Aware as well that the South Vietnamese would necessarily be a part of any censorship program that developed and that they were unsympathetic to the American idea of freedom of the press, he was also concerned that they might use censorship as a tool to intimidate reporters who criticized them. If that happened, it might alienate the American people, who had never shown much interest in the war but whose support, as in earlier conflicts, was all-important. Westmoreland supplemented his voluntary guidelines with a program that attempted to keep the press informed by providing regular background briefings for selected correspondents, 24-hour consultation services by knowledgeable public affairs officers, daily press conferences, transportation into the field for newsmen who wanted to see the war up close, and a system of press camps throughout Vietnam to supply reporters in the field with at least rudimentary amenities.

The effort had its effect, but in the end failed to compensate for major flaws in the American strategy. For by choosing to leave the enemy's sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia intact and by refusing to invade North Vietnam or to block off the enemy's ports, the United States left the practical initiative to the communists. The foe chose when and where to fight. Under the circumstances, the only positive option left was to convince the enemy that there was no hope for his cause. Yet to do that, President Lyndon Johnson had first to win the support of a reluctant American public for a prolonged war of attrition by convincing it that South Vietnam was worth the effort and that American forces would win without a major sacrifice of lives and treasure.

But he could not bring it off. For many reasons—political immaturity brought on by years of French misrule, corruption, a lack of will brought on by exposure to the “take it over” attitude of the American military—the South Vietnamese were unreceptive to the sort of reforms that might have made their cause attractive to the American public. Furthermore, though US forces seemed to win all the battles, the enemy never went away.

The Johnson Administration responded to the tensions that resulted by using all the facilities of the government and military services to mount public relations campaigns to demonstrate that the South Vietnamese armed forces were effective, that programs to win the hearts and minds of the country's peasantry were working, and that the American effort was indeed making progress. The news media replayed those themes, but each official statement of optimism seemed to have a pessimistic counterpart and each statistic showing progress an equally convincing opposite. Those ambiguities found their way into press sentiment as well, and into the nightly briefing for the Saigon correspondents, which soon became known to reporters and public affairs officers alike as “The Five O’Clock Follies.”

As the war continued, public affairs officers found themselves caught between the President's efforts to shore up support for his policies and their own judgment that the military should remain above politics. They recommended that the public affairs apparatus in Vietnam deal only with military matters and leave to civilian agencies more suited to making political statements all attempts to justify the conflict. They were overruled by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on grounds that the war required explanation in every way possible. As a result, by late 1967 members of the military were as involved in selling the war as the political appointees they served.

The effect of the policy could be seen in the evolving way the press viewed General Westmoreland. Prior to his trip to the United States in April 1967, when he addressed Congress and willingly joined President Johnson's attempts to market the war, his credibility with the press was high. Newsmen often replayed his background briefings in Saigon word for word in their reports. After he injected himself into the controversies surrounding the war, he became identified as a spokesman for the President's policies. From then

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on, his background briefings rarely appeared without comment. Reporters felt free to disagree with what he had to say.

Complicating the situation was a more general conflict in South Vietnam between the American press and military. Believing that the news media had generally supported official policy in earlier American wars, many members of the military expected similar support in Vietnam. When the failure of Johnson's strategy made that impossible, they blamed the press for the credibility problems they experienced. The news media, for its part, was hardly more forbearing. Citing a host of contradictions, reporters accused the military of attempting to mislead the American public. In the meantime, they misled the public themselves by sacrificing depth and analysis to color, while failing to make the most of the legitimate news within their reach. The good and bad points of the South Vietnamese army and government, the wars in Laos and Cambodia, the policies and objectives of the Hanoi regime and the Viet Cong, even the M-16 rifle all probably received less coverage in the press, positive and negative, than they should have.

In the end, the war itself—rather than the press or the supposed failure of the government adequately to prepare the people for war—alienated the American public. Every time the number of Americans killed and wounded increased by a factor of ten—going from 1000 to 10,000, 10,000 to 100,000—public support as measured by the Gallup Poll fell 15 percentage points.<sup>52</sup> By 1972, public sentiment had turned decisively against the war. The fears Ulysses S. Grant had expressed during the American Civil War were echoed in a final message from Johnson's successor, President Richard Nixon, to the American Ambassador in South Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker. The South Vietnamese, according to Nixon, would have to go along with the peace treaty the United States had concluded with North Vietnam "or we have to go it alone." The main defenders of the Administration's war policies in Congress, he said, had made it plain that if the objections of the Saigon regime posed the only roadblock to the agreement, they would themselves lead the fight to cut off all military and



economic assistance to South Vietnam. Despite the mandate he had received in the 1972 presidential election, Nixon concluded, "The door has been slammed shut hard and fast by the long-time supporters of my policies in Vietnam in the House and Senate who control the purse strings. . . . The fat is on the fire. . . . It is time to fish or cut bait."<sup>53</sup>

**T**he door Nixon referred to had swung back and forth repeatedly during American history, coming closer to shutting at some times than at others. George Washington had discerned its movement. So had Grant. The exaggerated hype that emerged from the effort to sell World War I was partly the result of an attempt to keep it open. The door caused few problems during World War II, when the United States was under attack, but it is tempting to speculate about what would have happened if the Korean War had lasted much longer than it did. Recent analyses indicate that public support for that war declined in an inverse proportion to casualties by much the same degree as in Vietnam.<sup>54</sup>

If there is a lesson, or some enduring principle, to be drawn from the history of the Army's efforts at public affairs, it goes back to the statement by Joel Barlow, that Americans see themselves as equal in their rights and expect to be treated accordingly. Throughout much of its history, the Army has defended that precept but has found it difficult to reconcile with the requirement for secrecy that war imposes. During the 19th century the Army lacked a formal public affairs program and depended upon its officers and the central government to generate the support it needed. The result was often painful. For while some commanders were adept indeed at handling the people, their representatives in Congress, and the press, others such as Sherman were not. After every war, a period of decay usually set in. The Army survived, but often, it seemed, just barely.

During the 20th century, the Army undertook formal public affairs programs to compensate. They helped, but their success during World War II at the hands of such master communicators as Marshall and Eisenhower led to the growth of an idea that public relations could handle almost every problem. The concept flowered in Vietnam, where Johnson and his advisers appeared to gamble that public relations could win at home what they seemed unable to attain on the battlefield. Students of the well-placed leak, adept at manipulating both the electorate and the news media, they forgot at least two commonsense rules of effective advertising: first, that good public relations may indeed induce a buyer to purchase a product once, but all subsequent sales still depend on whether the product itself fulfills his expectations; second, that the truth has greater ultimate power than the most pleasing of bromides.

The Army clearly has both a right and an obligation to communicate its requirements to the American people and their representatives. To do otherwise would be to jeopardize its primary mission to defend the nation. Yet if

history teaches anything, it advises commanders to maintain their credibility with the people at all times and to remain above the sort of political involvements that harmed Westmoreland's command. There are occasions when they must deal firmly with the nation's news media, but, for their own good if not out of principle, they must do so equitably and with a keen awareness that the concept of a free press emerged not from chance but out of the very fiber of the nation. Well-trained public affairs officers can help in this by becoming brokers who attempt to reconcile the military point of view with that of the civilian world. To do that, as one of the Army's greatest public affairs officers, Major General Winant Sidle, observed, those officers must be an integral part of the Army but must also cultivate a perspective that is somewhat apart. Only in that way can they serve the Army while doing their duty to the people.<sup>55</sup>

The American soldier, as Baron von Steuben observed, represents a unique point of view. It sometimes makes him difficult to deal with but it also makes him strong. In the same way, freedom of speech and of the press in time of war may sometimes be a problem, but they make the nation strong. In that, as a presidential commission on freedom of the press observed in 1947, they are similar to democracy itself—always in danger but always dangerous.<sup>56</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Barlow is quoted by Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1969), p.vii.
2. Charles Pinckney, quoted *ibid.*, p. 596.
3. James Madison, "No. 63," *The Federalist* (New York: The Modern Library, 1937), p. 411.
4. See Alexander Hamilton, "No. 84," in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 517.
5. *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, Part I, quoted in Robert K. Wright, *The Continental Army* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1983), p. 142.
6. James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington, The Forge of Experience* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), p. 255.
7. James Thomas Flexner, *Washington, The Indispensable Man* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), pp. 110-11.
8. Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 258-63.
9. J. C. A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 494-99.
10. Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanich, 1975), p. 23.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
12. Interview with Mr. Kim Holein, Civil War historian, US Army Center of Military History, 20 January 1988.
13. J. C. Andrews, *The North Reports the Civil War* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1955), p. 641. See also Knightley, p. 27.
14. Sherman is quoted in Joseph H. Ewing, "The New Sherman Letters," *American Heritage*, July 1987, pp. 24-41.
15. Ulysses S. Grant, quoted in John Formby, *The American Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), p. 327.
16. Knightley, p. 27.
17. E. J. McClernand, "The Santiago Campaign," in *The Santiago Campaign* (Richmond: Society of the Army of Santiago de Cuba, 1927), p. 10.
18. Richard Harding Davis, *The Cuban and Porto Rican Campaigns* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), p. 98.
19. This section is based upon interview with Dr. Edgar Raines, Center of Military History historian and biographer of J. Franklin Bell, 15 January 1988.

20. D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), I, 127-31.
21. Dupuy is quoted *ibid.*, p. 131.
22. See, for example, Frank Geers, "The Government of War Correspondents," *Journal of the Military Service Institution*, 44 (May-June 1909), 416-17.
23. Joseph J. Mathews, *Reporting the Wars* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1957), p. 209. See also US War College Division, General Staff Corps, *The Proper Relation between the Army and the Press in War* (Washington: GPO, 1916).
24. William Hammond, "Propaganda: World War I and II," *The Dictionary of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978).
25. Mathews, pp. 171-72.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 155-58, 170-72, 175; Knightley, pp. 114-35; William M. Hammond, *The U.S. Army in Vietnam: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1988), introduction.
27. Palmer is quoted in Mathews, p. 155.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
29. The same was not true for Germany. The case can be made that Kaiser Wilhelm's failure to inform his people of the reverses occurring on the Western Front left them unprepared for defeat and contributed materially to the confusion and chaos in the country's cities that followed the German army's surrender.
30. Addison F. McGhee and Kenneth L. Fox, "A History of the Office of the Chief of Information to include Its Missions and Functions," 11 September 1964, unpublished manuscript, Office of the Chief of Information, p. 18, copy in Center of Military History files.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-29.
32. F. H. Osborne, "Information and Education Division," *Military Review*, 24 (December 1944), 22-26.
33. Elmer Davis, Director, Office of War Information, quoted by John Morton Blum, *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 34.
34. Henry L. Stimson, quoted *ibid.*, p. 34.
35. Palmer Hoyt, Domestic Director, Office of War Information, "The Use and Abuse of Restraints," in *Journalism in Wartime, A Symposium of the School of Journalism, the University of Missouri*, ed. Frank Luther Mott (Washington: American Council on Public Affairs, 1943), pp. 42-43. See also Mathews, pp. 176, 214.
36. Mathews, p. 94.
37. George C. Marshall, quoted by Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Organizer of Victory, 1943-1945* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 93.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 359.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
40. E. K. G. Sixsmith, *Eisenhower as Military Commander* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), p. 10. See also Steven E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower, 1890-1952* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 176.
41. Sixsmith, p. 71.
42. Ambrose, p. 176.
43. Fletcher Pratt, "How the Censors Rigged the News," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1946, p. 99.
44. John Steinbeck, *Once There Was a War* (London: Heinemann, 1959; Corgi Edition, 1961), pp. 11-15.
45. Knightley, pp. 301-02.
46. Mathews, p. 176.
47. Douglas MacArthur to the Department of the Army, quoted by D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), III, 566.
48. B. C. Mossman, "Command and Press Relationships in the Korean Conflict," undated [1967] Center of Military History study, Center of Military History files.
49. *Ibid.*
50. See Knightley, pp. 336-56, for a brief, if highly opinionated, survey of public affairs problems during the war.
51. This section is based upon Hammond, *The U.S. Army in Vietnam: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, conclusion.
52. John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973).
53. Message, Kissinger WHS 2257 to Bunker, 26 November 1972, repeating two memos from Nixon to Kissinger. Quoted in Jeffrey Clarke, *The U.S. Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support, the Later Years* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1988), 491ff.
54. See Mueller.
55. Interview with Major General Winant Sidle, Chief of Information, US Army, 12 July 1973.
56. See William Ernest Hocking, *Freedom of the Press, A Framework of Principle*, Report from the Commission on Freedom of the Press (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1947).